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## CONFUCIANISM, AN APPRECIATION

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From the time when I began to make a study of Confucianism, it has been my growing conviction that no antagonism should exist between Confucianism and Christianity. The two religions, like two persons, should be friends; and as two persons, who are friends, differ in mien, physique, temperament, thought, manner, and occupation, so these two religions, while differing in many characteristics, ceremonies, and the consciousness as to what is right and what is wrong, should be friendly to each other and helpful to each other, through agreement in those spiritual ideas which are essential and fundamental, through the reverential realization of the common source of all truth and goodness, and through aspirations after higher things, an enlarged vision, and future perfection, which these religions, along with the best in all lands, expect ere long to see fulfilled.

Even where these two religions differ, they may still dwell together in the spirit of concord. We may not look for uniformity or complete agreement; we may look for harmony and mutual regard. Confucius, in one of his terse sayings, has said, "The Princely Man is harmonious but does not agree with others; the Mean Man tries to be like others, but is not harmonious." It is a misconception to think that Confucianism and Christianity are the same; it is an equal misconception to think that the two are antagonistic. The least that we should pray for is that the two, while differing from each other, shall be tolerant of each other. The most we can pray for is that the two shall at last unite in the unity of God and in personal determination to do, as Christ enjoined, the will of God.

The first reason for expressing appreciation of Confucianism is because it lays emphasis on the duties of right living, which are of essential and universal application. The moral nature of man, the rule of conscience, the moral virtues as developed from justice and benevolence, are the foundation principles on which rises the sublime structure of Confucian teaching. The virtues taught under various terms and in manifold forms of expression relate so directly and clearly to the present life, to human obligation, and to actual deeds, that many have assumed that Confucianism is only a system of ethics. If so, we must acknowledge that it is high ethics, and that no people have been so saturated with ethical ideas as have the Chinese. It is the moral element that makes significant the ancient civilization of China.

The soil from which spring forth all virtues is the moral nature of man. The orthodox theory of Confucianism, entirely compatible with the orthodox theory of Christianity, is that all men are thus endowed with this moral nature, a law written in the heart, a conscience to discern between right and wrong, a heavenly rule, the voice of God within. If the orthodox Confucianist and the orthodox Christian differ in their interpretation, it is as to the other theory of what is called "original sin" and "total depravity." That men have an aptitude to sin, and that it is hard to get them to do right, will be acknowledged by both Confucianist and Christian, but they separate when they begin to theorize as to whether or not all men are born *in* sin and *with* sin, and whether sin is hereditary, to be traced back to the first man.

Mencius has spoken most clearly on this particular doctrine, differing from other theories which prevailed in his day. He said:

"The feeling of commiseration belongs to all men; so does that of shame and dislike, and that of reverence and respect, and that of approving and disapproving. The feeling of commiseration

implies the principle of benevolence; that of shame and dislike, the principle of righteousness; that of reverence and respect, the principle of propriety; and that of approving and disapproving, the principle of knowledge. Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and knowledge, are not infused into us from without. We are certainly furnished with them; and a different view is simply from want of reflection. Hence it is said, 'Seek and you will find them. Neglect and you will lose them.' Men differ from one another in regard to them—some as much again as others, some five times as much, and some to an incalculable amount. It is because they cannot carry out fully their natural powers. It is said in the *Book of Poetry*, 'Heaven in producing mankind, gave them their various faculties and relations with their specific laws. These are the invariable rules of nature for all to hold, and all love this admirable virtue.'

"Confucius said, 'The maker of this ode knew indeed the principle of our nature!' We may thus see that every faculty and relation must have its law, and since there are invariable rules for all to hold, they consequently love this admirable virtue."

From the quotation which Mencius makes from the *Book of Poetry*, we learn that Confucian teachings are not only ethical but religious. We are taught that the moral nature of man is the production of Heaven or God. This is the very first sentence in the *Doctrine of the Mean*: "What Heaven has conferred or ordained is called (moral) nature; to comply with this nature is called the path (of duty); to cultivate or put in order this path is called instruction (a system of teaching, a religion)." So the Sung philosopher and commentator, Chu-fu-tsze, has declared in this connection that "men and the world of matter have each received from Heaven an endowment of supreme law."

Possessed of this moral inheritance from God, all the duties of men are summed up in the one comprehensive word, called Virtue. China's ancient teachers ring the changes on this word; over and over again men are exhorted to cultivate virtue. Sometimes, as in the *Great Learning*, the injunction is cultivation of one's

personality, or what is commonly called the training of character. One of Confucius' maxims is, "The Princely Man cherishes virtue; the Mean Man cherishes comfort." Again he says, "When virtue is not cultivated; when learning is not discussed; when righteousness is learned but not practised; and when that which is not good cannot be changed; this is my solicitude." The first sentence in the *Great Learning* says that "the way of the Great Learning may be summed up in three things: cultivating illustrious virtue, renovating the people, and resting in the highest goodness."

Virtue, by which the moral nature of man is denominated, has many characteristics, but is summed up in the five cardinal virtues—humanity, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and fidelity. The first two are used the most by both Confucius and Mencius. The first, as a Chinese character, means love as between man and man, and may be called charity or brotherly love. This too is characterized in many ways as is charity in the Christian Scriptures. Thus when Confucius was asked by one of his disciples what it was, he replied, "To be able to practise five things under the heavens constitutes charity." And being asked what they were, he added: "Respect, large-heartedness, fidelity, earnestness, and kindness. If you are respectful, you will not be insulted; if you are large-hearted, you will win all; if you are faithful, men will repose trust in you; if you are earnest, you will accomplish much; if you are kind, you will be able to employ the services of others." This is much like the teaching of the Apostle Paul, where he says, "Put on charity, which is the bond, the girdle, of perfectness."

And as with the great Apostle righteousness is taught equally with brotherly love, so with Confucius and Mencius. The latter says: "Brotherly love is the heart of man; righteousness is the path for man to follow. How lamentable, if men neglect the path and do not

pursue it; if they lose their heart and do not know how to find it again." Confucius says, "The Princely Man in the world does not set his mind either for or against anything, but what is right, that he will follow."

The Chinese Classics are in fact saturated with these teachings, exhortations, commands, for living an upright life and performing all the duties which Heaven prescribes, as revealed in an enlightened conscience and as applicable to all the conditions of life. The Chinese people too have been thus saturated with these high and worthy sentiments, and from childhood, in the school or out of the school, have been impressed with human obligation, as directed in deep reverence to God and in fidelity to man.

A second reason for appreciating Confucianism is because its great principles, while applicable to all life, apply in particular to the social, the political, and the educational departments of life. The five cardinal virtues relate to what is called the five social or human relations—ruler and his ministers, husband and wife, parent and child, brother and brother, friend and friend. These relations are in our Christian phraseology spiritualized, or widened to far beyond the limits of one's own family-circle. Thus the spirit that should exist between parent and child is that which should exist between public officers or rulers and the people.

Similarly, all moral teachings are made to apply to all who exercise authority. The moral science of Confucianism is in the first place social science or sociology, and in the second place political science or national well-being. The political science of Confucianism gives us light less on forms of government than on the duties to virtue, which rest on officers of the government from the highest to the lowest. In the Confucian sense, political reform means, first of all, moral reform, the reformation of the individual. Numberless citations could be

made but only a few are needed, and these, I may remark, are known even to the illiterate of China as well as to the learned *literati*.

The Classic of the *Great Learning* may be called a handbook on the science of morals and politics linked together. It deals with the supreme obligations of the Supreme Ruler of a nation, but it is a treatise which each child, rich or poor, all over the land, has, in past years at least, been required to memorize. It shows the duty of rulers to train their individual characters, and it shows how closely the prosperity of a nation is linked with the righteous character and conduct of the ruler and officials.

This teaching of the *Great Learning* by one of the disciples of Confucius corroborates the earlier teachings of the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*, three to four thousand years ago. In one of the Odes by the Duke of Chou to the Ministers of the Chou dynasty in praise of King Wen and in lamentation for the downfall of the dynasty of Shang or Yin, we have these words:

“Ever think of your ancestor,  
Cultivating your virtue,  
Always striving to accord with the will (of Heaven).  
So shall you be seeking for much happiness.  
Before Yin lost the multitudes,  
(Its kings) were the assessors of God.  
Look to Yin as a beacon;  
The great appointment is not easily (preserved).

“The appointment is not easily (preserved).  
Do not cause your own extinction.  
Display and make bright your righteousness and name,  
And look at (the fate of) Yin in the light of Heaven.  
The doings of High Heaven,  
Have neither sound nor smell.  
Take your pattern from king Wen,  
And the myriad regions will repose confidence in you.”

In another Ode occur these words:

“God said to king Wen,  
‘I am pleased with your intelligent virtue,  
Not loudly proclaimed nor portrayed,  
Without extravagance or changeableness,  
Without consciousness of effort on your part,  
In accordance with the pattern of God.’”

The whole history beginning with the ancient rulers, Yao and Shun, down to Yü the Great, founder of the Hsia dynasty in 2205 B.C., on to T'ang, founder of the Shang, in 1766 B.C., on to King Wu, founder of the Chou dynasty in 1122 B.C., is a history full of warning, admonition, and exhortation, with examples of upright reformers and statesmen to follow and cherish, and with the example of bad rulers to shun and abhor. The story is told in the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of History*. In *Spring and Autumn* Confucius tells of later events, a sad record of disorder, confusion, lawlessness, and wickedness, one kingdom quarreling with another, and one ruler overthrown by another. Everywhere and through all these centuries confirmation is given to the declaration of Solomon, “Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.”

The *Analects*, the *Great Learning*, and Mencius carry on the same teaching—that righteousness and benevolence are the essentials of government. These are the questions which concern the Sages of Confucianism as they expound the science of politics, and not the multitude of questions with which Western political science loves to enlighten the world.

Ancient learning as distinct from the new learning is also inseparably bound up in the moral and religious principles of Confucianism. Ethics and the substratum of religion enter into a knowledge of history, sociology, finance, political science, *belles-lettres*, poetry, etiquette, and music; while modern and Western learning has little



to say of God, and overlooks the common duties of human relations. I appreciate for this reason what Confucianism has wrought in the past, and dread the effects of the new learning on the student class of today.

A third ground of appreciation is the remarkable fact that Confucianism makes supreme and all-important the root or origin of things. In looking at Confucianism from the superficial point of view, in its aspects of ceremonialism, rules of etiquette, methods of governing, land taxation, the worship of spirits, and even in its moral maxims, there is good chance for criticism as well as for admiration. When we search for its inner worth, for the kernel of eternal truth, for basic principles, all criticism vanishes and admiration alone remains. This search for first causes, this delving down to the root of the tree of knowledge and the tree of righteousness, is the most vital of all the teachings which Confucianism offers to China and also to religious thinkers throughout the world.

Early in the *Analects* of Confucius occur these words: "The Princely Man gives attention to the root of things; when the root is secure, there spring up all kinds of truth; filial piety and fraternal regard, these are the root of benevolent action." In the *Great Learning* we have the simple statement: "All things have a root, and they have branches; all deeds have a beginning and an end." The writer then traces back the process of pacifying the Empire to the good order of the State, to the regulation of the family, to the cultivation of the individual, to the rectifying of the heart, to the sincerity of the thoughts, and finally to the highest attainment of knowledge, and this extreme knowledge is found in investigating all things, in the spirit of research. He then throws in the sentence that "from the Emperor down to the mass of the people, all should make the cultivation of individual character the root."

Later on, in the same book, when dealing with the great problem of making the nation rich and prosperous, the writer traces the following stages in the development back to the original cause:

“On this account the ruler will first take pains about his own virtue. Possessing virtue will give him the people. Possessing the people will give him the territory. Possessing the territory will give him its wealth. Possessing the wealth, he will have resources for expenditure. Virtue is the root; wealth is the result.”

Similarly, the very first sentence in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, as we have said, shows how all religion or instruction is preceded by the path of duty or doctrine, and this by Heaven's law in the soul, or man's moral nature, and this by Heaven or God, from whom every law, principle, and religion have come. In all the Classics we are taught again and again that God is the great First Cause, and on Him we are all dependent. The philosophers of the Sung period revelled in such discussions, but always reverentially, and the *Book of Changes* with the notes of Confucius form the basis of their philosophy.

The philosopher, Chu-fu-tsze, gives an elaborate explanation of the origin of the universe, which is more that of gradual evolution than of distinct creation. Man, the material world, heaven and earth, are all preceded by a formless, chaotic condition, and this in turn is preceded by two principles, the one termed Ruling Principle (li), and the other a Vivifying Principle (ch'i). They are two, and yet so joined that the one cannot exist without the other. The one is lifeless; the other full of life. The Ruling Principle needs the Vivifying Principle to secure results, while the Vivifying Principle in turn depends on the Ruling Principle for the way its power shall be exerted and exhibited.

“Being asked whether the Ruling Principle really existed before heaven and earth, he said before heaven and earth there was most certainly just this Ruling Principle. The Principle existing, heaven and earth existed. If this Principle did not exist, there would have been no heaven or earth, no man or things. The Ruling Principle existing, then the Vivifying Principle exists, flows forth, pervades, and germinates all the material world. Being asked if it was the Ruling Principle which germinated all things, he replied that when the Ruling Principle exists, the Vivifying Principle exists, flows forth, pervades, and germinates. The Ruling Principle as such is without form or body.”

The next problem is the origin of these two Principles. In some respects it looks as if there were nothing beyond or before, but that the two Principles were the First Cause. This is not, however, the real teaching of this Chinese thinker. He traces them, as well as heaven and earth, to the Absolute, the Great Extreme, called *T'ai Chi*. He says:

“Being asked whether the Absolute is the chaotic mass before heaven and earth came into being, or the general name for the Ruling Principle of heaven and earth and all the material world, he replied that the Absolute is the Ruling Principle of heaven and earth and all things. As to that which is within heaven and earth, the Absolute is in the midst of heaven and earth. As to that which is within all things, the Absolute is inherent in all.”

Chu-fu-tsze in his abstract speculation advances to another great thought, and that is that first of all there was the Infinite, called the *Wu Chi*, but that the Infinite was the Absolute, and the Absolute the Infinite, just like a circle in the ancient diagram. The one side is the incomprehensible, the mysterious, the invisible; the other side represents through the Ruling and Vivifying Principles a vast manifestation, unfolded in heaven and earth, all matter and man. He says:

“The Absolute, the Great Extreme, derives its name from the idea of the highest pivot. The sages called it the Absolute, meaning

thereby the root of heaven, earth, and all things. Hence it was that Chou-tsze termed it the Infinite, and so expressed the Mysterious without sound or fragrance. . . . The Absolute is just the extreme point, beyond which no one can go—most high, most magnificent, most subtle, most spiritual, surpassing all.”

By thus examining the doctrines taught by the Sung philosophers and based on the old, mystical teachings of the *Book of Changes*, one should be convinced that Confucianism is a religion as well as a system of ethics. Confucianism cannot be limited to the sayings of Confucius, still less to his ethical sayings. The Classics which he compiled are saturated with religious ideas. All righteous conduct and a virtuous heart draw their life from above. All are dependent on God.

A fourth ground of appreciation is the fact that the men who gave utterance to all these good teachings lived good lives. They practised righteousness who preached it. They were not only teachers, but good men and holy men. From Yao and Shun down to Confucius, every one who taught wise and good sayings was an earnest and practical reformer. The lives of these men carried more weight than their words. In a turbulent age, Confucius was moved to leave his class-room and go out into society and the life of different kingdoms, exhorting the common people and, still more, kings and officers, to abandon wickedness and establish just laws and right ideas. As James Freeman Clarke has said, “Many beautiful and noble things are related concerning the character of Confucius—of his courage in the midst of danger, of his humility in the highest position of honor. His writings and life have given the law to Chinese thought. He is the patron saint of that great Empire.” The seventy-two disciples of Confucius were chosen more for their love of goodness than for mental attainments. Mencius, his chief apostle, is thus reckoned among the Holy Men; his

character was as great as his intellect. So, too, the noted commentators of the T'ang and Sung periods, and those less known in the last dynasty, have given strength to their writings by the sincerity of their lives. Cant, hypocrisy, fine words but bad living, have characterized none of these leaders, but only men of less calibre and especially the *litterati* of later years. But as Christianity is not to be judged by the hypocrisies of Christians, so Confucianism should not be condemned for the lack of virtue, truth, and sincerity among mere students of the ancient Classics. For four thousand years the noted teachers of thought found in the Confucian system have been men who practised what they preached, and for this they are worthy of honor.

A fifth reason for appreciating Confucianism is because it is adapted to the common people as well as to the learned. The usual name of Confucianism implies that it is a religion of the learned. To be a Chinese scholar a thorough knowledge of the Classics has been deemed a necessity. Confucianism is thus not only a system of ethics with spiritual truths but a method of learning. Chinese education has meant a training in the literary excellencies of the Classics, whether the moral and religious ideas were always accepted or not. Thus up to the present, the *litterati* have been dependent on the Confucian Classics. Many such are inclined to make Confucianism only a learning and not a system of ethics. They even go so far as to declare it is not a religion at all. Confucius has been dethroned from his lofty place as a messenger of Heaven and a preacher of righteousness. He has been made only an essayist, a *littérateur*. When Confucianism is thus narrowed, it will not be long before, in the face of modern science and the new learning, it is rejected altogether.

As a matter of history, the educated men of China in the past, but not in the present, have been close stu-

dents of Confucianism. Its ideas have been acceptable, its rites have been observed. The life of the learned has been moulded by Confucianism, which in common phraseology has been called the Great Religion.

The life of the common people has also been moulded by Confucianism. In fact the mind of the Chinese is Confucian. The great underlying, all-important principles of Confucianism have become known to all, the illiterate as well as the learned. Certain phrases embodying the germ thought of Confucianism are on the lips of ignorant women, the country peasant, and the little child. Confucianism should be called not only a religion of the learned, but the Religion of China. Its vital teachings clearly expressed have permeated the whole nation. They are adapted to high and low, to ruler and people, and therein show their divine inspiration and origin in Heaven.

These five reasons should convince every one that for a Christian to appreciate Confucianism is not senseless or base, but reasonable and sound. The position is both liberal and orthodox. The one great criticism passed today on Confucianism is that it has no vitality, no dynamic power, and, being a human teaching, can have none. It is true that it seems to be decadent, that its good points are being discarded, and that it is fast becoming mere ceremonialism, a worship of Confucius, a cult, and not a life or even a system of religion or ethics. To my mind this is to be regretted. It is equally clear that the criticism contains a fallacy. If Confucianism as a religion has lost its power, it should not be forgotten that many branches of the Christian Church in the past, and also today, have been decadent, retaining the form, but losing the life, of a spiritual religion. The only way for Confucianism or Christianity or any other religion to have life-giving power is to resume connection with the one living and true God, rely more on His spiritual presence

than on systems and forms, rites and creeds, and believe with a new assurance of faith that God is All and in all, and that man, while His offspring, can do no good apart from Him. This truth, as well as the criticism itself, applies equally to Christian and Confucianist.